

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Have fun with party giving

Looking for a great reason to throw a party?

A few weeks back, I was the guest, along with chef Tom MacKinnon, at Jan and Mike Maich's home in Northville. As I walked up the drive to enter the front door there were sounds of laughter and a distinct feeling of fun was in the air.

Not knowing what to expect, I entered while novice oenophile (wine collector) Mike was hosting the "First Annual Mich Wine Tasting and Auction for Charity."

It was a little after 11 p.m., and it was very evident the party started much earlier as many of the guests (there were about eight couples) seemed to be getting a little crazy throughout Mike's wine quiz. The sofa and wing-backed chairs were scooped for the opportunity to snuggle up on a big cushion while a roaring fire blazed and folks tried to discern what it was that made a white zinfandel pink instead of white. (For your info, it's the skin of the grape that causes the wine to take on a bluish color)

The party was in full swing.

Now being the only person in attendance not being influenced by the grape, I immediately eschewed up to the wine tasting table where the Miches had positioned 8 various bottles of chardonnays, sauvignon blancs and redwines in what looked like nothing more than a display filled with ice.

SCATTERED AROUND the table were visible signs of a previous tasting complete with papers requiring the guests to rate everything from bouquet (aroma) to aftertaste. It would serve no purpose to clue you in on what they liked (or, better yet, didn't like). Instead, I'll focus your attention as to why the party was thrown in the first place.

Seems that Jan and Mike have been getting together with a group of friends that number — about 10-12 couples — for the last 15 years or so. Most are friends from Michigan State University, but a few were "grandfathered in." The group (size varies monthly) gets together frequently for Halloween parties, Superbowl parties, Kentucky Derby parties and even just to play poker or a friendly game of cards.

Since the group has been together for more than 15 years, Jan and Mike thought it would be a great idea to give a little back and schedule a wine tasting and auction for charity. (This year's beneficiary was the American Cancer Society.)

In addition to the wine tasting, the party included a wine quiz, a smattering of great food, and a wine auction with eight selections chosen from Mike's cellar. A mini-descriptive brochure was printed up on the family computer, listing the wines to be auctioned along with their place of purchase, origin, retail price and a few comments by the budding oenophiles themselves.

THE WINES had a retail value of \$10-\$30 each, with Jan and Mike hoping to raise \$100 or so for the cancer research. Chef Tom MacKinnon was guest auctioneer and the bidding began with a nice little '87 chardonnay from the Magdalena Vineyards. Retail price was only \$9.50, but it was evident guests were getting into the swing of things when the bottle finally sold for an amazing \$28.

This continued for the next hour while such notable wines like an '83 cabernet sauvignon from Buena Vista garnered a bid of \$60. (Constant shouts of 'C'mon, this is for a good cause' rang through the air.)

To make a long story short, eight bottles of wine and a dated bottle of Calvados combined fetched more than \$500, all going to the Cancer Foundation.

Breathless Area businessman creates new mild onion, Chili Sweet

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

Onion lovers have a sweet treat in store when a new variety of sweet onion hits American markets this week.

Chili Sweet, a mild onion that requires long, warm days of consecutive sunshine to mature, is available now during the dead of winter.

The timing makes the large, globe-shaped onion that comes wrapped in a thin, pale yellow skin notable in culinary circles.

Sweet onions, grown in Georgia, Texas, California and Washington, are harvested in late spring and come available to U.S. consumers only two months of each year, May and June, because a long, hot growing season is essential.

Through a brass experiment that has proven quite successful, businessman Jim Huston of Bloomfield Hills has doubled the length of the annual market, from two to four months. Sweet onions, more specifically Chili Sweets, are now available to U.S. consumers in January and February.

For onion lovers, Huston's move is welcome news.

"DURING WINTER months, the only onions avail-

able in the market are extremely pungent, give indigestion" and were plucked from fields up to six months before, according to Huston, owner of Huston Produce that brokerages some 80,000 tons of onions and potatoes annually.

In contrast, Chili "tastes sweet, causes no indigestion, leaves no odor on the breath and, when cut, causes no tears," he said.

For Huston and all onion lovers, heaven is a thick slab of the sweet variety in a sandwich, on chili or eaten plain and raw.

Huston's love of onions developed naturally as a youth on his parent's 220-acre farm in Eaton Rapids where he was experimenting in growing onions 20 years ago, producing meatier results by planting fewer bulbs in narrower rows.

He applied similar logic to sweet onions in looking for a way to extend the annual harvest. Because sweet onions require exacting amounts of extensive sunshine to mature, they can be planted only at specific times of the year. . . at least, that is, north of the equator.

What about south of the equator, say in Chili?

"WOW. WHAT a fantastic idea. Why hasn't any-

Cook up potful of fish

By Geri Rinachler
special writer

THE FIRST TIME I sampled bouillabaisse, I was studying French provincial cooking in the south of France.

Knowing little about the authenticity of this Provencal specialty, I was soon informed by the locals that what Americans call bouillabaisse is a mere facsimile. According to the French, a true bouillabaisse can only be made with a variety of fish from the Mediterranean Sea near Marseille.

Of course, many of the inhabitants disagree on just which fish and how many varieties are essential. But the one ingredient they do agree on is rascasse, a scorpionlike fish, which gives this stew its significant flavor.

Duplicating an authentic bouillabaisse, as you can see, may be next

to impossible, but creating a savory Provencal fish stew or New England chowder can be a snap, using these tips on selecting, cooking and seasoning fish soups and stews.

Even though a dish like bouillabaisse may seem complicated, one can actually be put together in about 30 minutes. Not all chowders or fish stews need to begin with homemade fish stock. I'm convinced a flavorful fish chowder can be made with a homemade vegetable stock or one made from a vegetable bouillon cube made by Knorr, or others available in the health food department such as Barilla's Nutra Soup.

PAGING THROUGH vintage cookbooks will reveal that most fisherman stews and chowders were made with water or milk. But remember, the fish they were using couldn't have been fresher or more flavorful.

The most difficult task in making any fish dish is shopping for the freshest fish possible. Taking the time to seek out a reputable, top-quality fish shop is fundamental. Once that has been accomplished, ask lots of questions about the fish and how often the shop receives deliveries.

Top-quality fish should smell fresh. Whole fish should be shiny with clear eyes. It should not be sticky and should feel firm. When selecting fillets, use the same criteria, avoiding those pieces that have dark brown or red spots.

Some cookbooks recommend buying fish trimmings for a soup pot but unless you've caught the fish yourself you have no way of knowing what you're getting. It's not as easy to judge the quality of clams, mussels and oysters in their shells. Check

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DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Jim Huston shows onions and potatoes that are finding favor with cooks. that are finding favor with cooks. Dr. Leonard Pike in response to Huston's idea. Pike, a horticulturist and plant breeder at Texas A&M University, is also an authority on onions.

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Knows his onions, and potatoes, too

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

New produce fittingly calls for new recipes, according to Jim Huston, a horticulturist who owns one of Michigan's largest produce brokerage firms. Huston introduced gourmet Yukon Gold potatoes to Michigan consumers last year. These potatoes can be found locally at Farmer Jack's, Great Scott and Kroger. Before long, another Huston creation will hit the market place — Chili Sweet onions.

Huston, in conjunction with nutritionists and others, has created new recipes for both vegetables.

COCONUT BON BONS

4 cup mashed potatoes made from Yukon Gold potatoes
4 cups coconut, flaked
1 pound confectioners' sugar
1/2 teaspoon almond extract
12 ounces chocolate chips
1/2 cake paraffin

Mix potatoes, coconut, confectioners' sugar and almond extract until smooth. Form balls and chill until very cold.

Melt chocolate chips and paraffin in top of double boiler. Using two forks, drop balls into chocolate mixture, making sure that each is well coated. Set on waxed paper.

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